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ABSTRACT

Naomi Karp is the Director of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (ECI) in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education. This interview concerns funding for early childhood education research through OERI's Field-Initiated Studies (FIS) Grant Program. Questions addressed in the interview are: (1) What is the FIS grant program?; (2) Who is eligible to apply?; (3) As head of the Early Childhood Institute, what are you hoping to see the grant applications funded through this program accomplish?; (4) In the FY2000 grants that were recently funded, what characteristics were typical of the strongest proposals?; (5) What were some of the problems typical of weaker proposals?; (6) When will you be accepting more applications for another round of FIS funding?; (7) What would you most like the early childhood community to know about this grant program?; (8) What do you mean by relevant (grant applications)?; and (9) Where are the exact details about the program located? (EV)

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ED 446 876

**Early Childhood Research & Practice**
Vol. 2 No. 2: Fall 2000

Title Page

**Research & Practice**

Readiness for School: A Survey of State Policies and Definitions
Gitanjali Saluja, Catherine Scott-Little, & Richard M. Clifford

Conceptualizing the Professional Role in Early Childhood Centers: Emerging Profiles in Four European Countries
Pamela Oberhuemer

Language Development and Science Inquiry: The Head Start on Science and Communication Program
Evelyn R. Klein, Penny L. Hammrich, Stefanie Bloom, & Anika Ragins

Starting Child Care: What Young Children Learn about Relating to Adults in the First Weeks of Starting Child Care
Carmen Dalli

**Observations & Reflections**

Early Childhood Educators and the FIS Grant Program: An Interview with Naomi Karp

**Features**

The Hairy Head Project
Barbara Gallick

Science Education and Young Children: Recent Citations from the ERIC Database

New at ERIC EECE

PS 029034

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**Volume 2, Number 2**

# Early Childhood Educators and the FIS Grant Program: An Interview with Naomi Karp

*Naomi Karp is the Director of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (ECI) in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education* http://www.ed.gov/. *ECRP Associate Editor Dianne Rothenberg recently spoke with her regarding funding for early childhood education research through OERI's Field-Initiated Studies Grant Program.*

**What is the FIS grant program?**

The Field-Initiated Studies or FIS grant program is a national competition to support research applications that come from practitioners and researchers, public policy makers, and other groups around the country reflecting their sense of what is most important and constructive to study. In other words, FIS grant applicants can choose their own topics for study along established lines of inquiry, or they can choose new topics that will build new theories, or they can test and apply new research methodologies that perhaps will solve enduring problems in the field of early childhood development and learning.

Grant applications for this program can be a maximum of 20 pages of narrative, plus appendices of the applicants' choosing. The grant period is a maximum of 36 months—basically, we ask people to describe the problem area they are going to address, tell us how they would solve this problem, and let us know what types of resources would be needed to solve it. In last year's competition, the grant awards ranged from about $270,000 (for an 18-month



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study) to about $1,740,000 (for a 36-month study). Since 1996, the Early Childhood Institute has funded 22 FIS grant applications.

**Who is eligible to apply?**

We have received grant applications from diverse applicants, including universities, education associations, private research organizations, pediatric hospitals, Head Start and child care entities, and public schools. We encourage partnerships and collaboration across disciplines in applications, which I think is particularly important if we are to address the needs of the whole child. The participation of many disciplines is necessary to serve the whole child. Especially for first-time applicants and community-based organizations that have programs that need study, it's helpful if they partner with universities in their communities to develop their grant applications.

**As head of the Early Childhood Institute, what are you hoping to see the grant applications funded through this program accomplish?**

It's important to be able to answer the "so what" question: So what difference will this work make in the lives of children and families? One of the best ways we can do that is to translate research findings so that families, policy makers, and the early childhood workforce can apply these findings to everyday situations in order to improve young children's learning and development.

**In the FY2000 grants that were recently funded, what characteristics were typical of the strongest proposals?**

They have usually addressed a current problem, one that has a long history in early childhood education. Often it's a problem that, if solved, would make a difference in the lives of many young children—in other words, the results could be generalizable. Funded applications have also typically had a strong literature review, a clearly defined population and control group, and a strong methodology (often with a blend of quantitative and qualitative research) for assessing the effects of an intervention or program.

One of our roles in this office is helping to be a translator of research findings. We try to get the word out about what improves young children's learning and development. We work with our grantees to develop new ways to disseminate their research findings. Perhaps one day we will have "a strong dissemination plan" as one of the criteria reviewers use to evaluate FIS applications.

**What were some of the problems typical of weaker proposals?**

Applicants sometimes forget to pay attention to details. They take for granted that reviewers will know a lot about their specific areas and fail to put in needed definitions or background information. Sometimes they forget to define samples and how samples will be recruited and retained. Sometimes they don't include control groups, or address what training will look like, or take sufficient care that the budget matches the scope of work. With a 20-page

limit, it's important to write succinctly and to organize the application well, and that's hard to do!

**When will you be accepting more applications for another round of FIS funding?**

The next competition should be in 2001, although no dates have been set yet. *ECRP* readers might want to check the Department's funding page under FIS at http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/FIS/ occasionally to make sure they don't miss the next set of deadlines.

**What would you most like the early childhood community to know about this grant program?**

We desperately need well-qualified reviewers, and we desperately need high-quality, relevant research grant applications. **If you are interested in becoming a reviewer, please send a complete resume to me, at The Early Childhood Institute, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW – Room 606d, Washington, DC 20208. We will enter your resume into our database.**

**What do you mean by relevant?**

We need research projects that address the challenges that early childhood educators, administrators, and families are grappling with every day around young children's learning and development. Since we try to base our work on the "three Rs" of early childhood education—Relationships, Resilience, and Readiness—we would like to see applications that address the issues related to these areas. We do know that the research says that we have to address the whole child, so we need grant applications that look at the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains of child development. We would like research applications that address the recommendations and challenges found in two important studies: *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* and *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Our Institute played a key role in funding these reports from the National Research Council, and they contain critical questions that need to be answered.

Applicants also should know that this grant program is highly competitive. We get a lot of grant applications for a relatively small number of awards, but we hope potential applicants won't be discouraged. We believe that most of our research is making a difference at the grass roots level. We are providing answers to questions that early childhood educators ask.

**Where are the exact details about the program located?**

You can find the description of the FIS program at this Web address: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/FIS/

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